In the 1980s, family farmers faced a crisis the likes of which hadn’t been seen since the Great Depression. Plummeting farm product prices and land values, rising interest rates, troubled credit markets and unfair lending practices pushed tens of thousands of farms out of business, forcing millions of people off their land. It was in this context that Willie Nelson, joined by John Mellencamp and Neil Young, organized a groundbreaking concert in 1985 to raise awareness and funds to help America’s family farmers, sparking a family farm movement that continues to this day. Dave Matthews joined the Board of Directors in 2001, adding another strong voice to Farm Aid’s work. This timeline features highlights from Farm Aid’s 30 years of action for family farmers and the Good Food Movement.

1985 – On September 22, Farm Aid was held in Champaign, Illinois. With just a performance to a crowd of 78,000, the event was the largest rock concert and country music event in history. Farm Aid established its $100-FARM-AID hotline to take in donations. The concert raised millions of dollars and drew enormous attention to the plight of America’s family farmers.

1985 - USDA settled Pflueger v. Glickman, the largest class-action lawsuit in US history brought by African-American farmers, allowing a certification program for US farmers to access federal, domestic, and foreign markets. As a result, and Farm Aid over $200,000 in local family farm service organizations that deliver aid to farm families.

1986 – Neil Young took out a full-page ad in USA Today with an open letter asking President Ronald Reagan, “Will the family farm in America die as a result of your administration?”

1986 – A massive campaign for farm credit law reform, led by Farm Aid and its partners, the National Family Farm Coalition, National Farmers Union, the Southern Farm Bureau, the National Farmers Union, and the Farmer’s Legal Action Group, saw victory as Congress passed The Agricultural Credit Act of 1987, saving thousands of family farms from foreclosure. Willie Nelson followed up on his ad with letters to nearly 60,000 family farmers to tell them where they could find financial and legal counsel.

1987 - The US Food and Drug Administration approved Monsanto’s Roundup Ready Genetically Engineered Monocot Herbicide (GEM), a controversial genetically engineered herbicide used to boost milk production. Farm Aid advocated for a regenerative mindset and supported efforts to label GEM-free dairy products.

1987 – On April 1, 1987, Willie Nelson joined farmers to protest a huge factory hog farm in Lincoln Township, Missouri. The event was a rainy city for farmers and communities angered by corporate abuse in agriculture, threats to food safety, pollution to the environment and the loss of family farms.

1987 - On June 18, 1987, John Mellencamp joined Senator Tom Harkin to testify before the US Senate on the Farmer to Consumer Summit. The event was a groundbreaking concert in 1985 to raise awareness and funds to help America’s family farmers, sparking a family farm movement that continues to this day. Dave Matthews joined the Board of Directors in 2001, adding another strong voice to Farm Aid’s work. This timeline features highlights from Farm Aid’s 30 years of action for family farmers and the Good Food Movement.

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